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Butchering Moses

Daniel Albright

There is no Moses, only a whole tribe of Moseses. In the course of his life he undergoes many shape-changes: an abandoned child drifting down a river; a leader of a slave revolt; a guide through the wilderness; a miracle-worker; a law-giver; a literary man writing the Pentateuch; a figure of disappointment, gazing from the mountain-top at the land of milk and honey he will never be permitted to enter. It is to be expected, then, that artistic representations of Moses would be vague and contradictory.

There is a small tradition of memorable musical Moseses. For example, in Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's oratorio *Die Israeliten in der Wüste* (1768-69), Moses is little more than a chorister promoted to soloist, the voice of his people praying to God for rescue; the main event is the miracle of the spring that suddenly flows from the rock. Bach set a text by Daniel Schiebeler, perhaps with some assistance from the redoubtable Klopstock, author of *Der Messias*; and Moses as precursor Messiah was the only Moses here present. A century later, in Max Bruch's oratorio *Moses* (1895), Moses' character has almost reversed: Bruch's Moses is a Jewish Wotan, thundering invective on his own people as idolators. Far from being at ease as a member of the chorus, he outshouts the whole multitude in a great antiphony, in the oratorio's one impressive passage, *Abtrünnige, kam es dahin mit euch?*, at the end of Part 1. Moses was always more at home in oratorio than in opera, where his lack of a dramatic sex life was a handicap; but Rossini, in *Mosè in Egitto*, perches Moses uncomfortably on top of a love story involving the Egyptian pharaoh's son and a Hebrew girl. It is always a perplexity when the lead character in an opera has no particularly intense personal relation with the other characters; sometimes such a libretto encourages the composer to identify the lead character with the orchestra, and this is exactly what happens in *Mosè*. Moses is a faceless torso of power, who summons God's revenge in the form of great orchestral interludes: the plague of darkness at the beginning, the parting of the Red Sea at the end. Rossini didn't add Moses' magnificent prayer *Dal tuo stellato soglio* until 1819; in the 1818 original, Moses had little of interest to sing—he was merely the conductor of the divine instrumentalists in the pit.

Representing Moses has been a trial for visual artists as well. They are vexed by the Vulgate's mistranslation of the Hebrew verb *qaran*, which can mean either *grow horns* or *shoot out rays*; by choosing the former definition, the translators of the Latin Bible enjoined artists to outfit Moses with a fine pair of horns on his forehead. Michelangelo knew how to sculpt Moses as an image of clenched potent wrath, despite the horns; but Tintoretto and other painters equivocated between the two definitions of *qaran* by plunking onto Moses's head two narrow yellow triangles, an effect that gives the impression of a defective halo. In this way the traditional iconography of Moses became entwined with the traditional iconography of fauns, satyrs, and cuckolds—and, worse, devils. Indeed in 1965, when Joseph Kiselewski's graceful terracotta Moses was unveiled at Syracuse University, members of the Latino American Law Student Association, the Black Law Student Association, the Women's Law Caucus, the Lambda Law Student Association, and the Jewish Law Student Association all complained against depicting Moses as a demon. (To see a picture of Kiselewski's Moses, and to read more about the furor at Syracuse, see <http://www.moseshand.com/studies/moses.htm>)

The visual Moses, then, was often at the threshold of burlesque. But Schoenberg, in *Moses und Aron* (1930-32), was the first composer to imagine a musical Moses of this sort. Schoenberg's Moses doesn't sing (except for one brief optional phrase); his music-speech has pitch-indications, but these pitches are gestic improvisations, not very closely related to tight unfurlings of the twelve-tone row that determines the real music in the opera. Moses is at once the opera's central force, and a songless creature trying to shove and bully his way into a spectacle in which he doesn't belong; far from conducting the orchestra, as in Rossini's opera, Schoenberg's Moses is helpless in the presence of music. The origins of Moses's *Sprechstimme* lie in Humperdinck's fairy-tale opera *Königskinder* (1895-97) and in the fairy-tale of nature-redemption (the wild hunt of the wind) at the end of Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* (1901-10): *Sprechstimme* is a kind of fairy speech. Schoenberg perfected the technique in 1912, for the cabaret show *Pierrot Lunaire*; and Moses is, from one point of view, a slapstick figure, God's clown.

The traditional mask known as a Pierrot (or Petrushka) is a sad clown—the weeping clown that never gets the girl, that remains helpless in the face of superior force. You might understand the following exchanging as part of a Pierrot skit:

The Burning Bush. Take off your shoes.

Moses. My tongue is stiff.

—except that this is one of the most sacred moments in the entire culture of the West. Schoenberg here promotes Pierrot's futility, his sense of inadequacy, his puzzledness, into the general buffoonery of mankind before an unfathomable God—Elohim, Adonai, Yahweh, at once singular and plural, a labyrinth of speech, a vertigo of song, an unsolvable sound-knot. This is the opera's opening scene: later, Moses is stronger, more assertive and blustering, but he nevertheless remains a curiously impotent presence: in Schoenberg's rewriting of *Exodus*, the miracle-worker is not Moses but Aron, who turns the rod into a snake and makes water gush from the rock. In Bertolt Brecht's *Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis* (1929), a gigantic clown complains of aches in his various limbs, and his straight men promptly saw them off, one by one; when Aron withers Moses's hand into a leprous thing, he is as much a black comedian as anyone in Brecht. *Moses und Aron*, by this way of thinking, is a farcical quarrel between a stage magician and a schemer. An evil stage-director could even present the shattering of the Tables of the Law as an act of petulance, with Moses sticking out his lower lip in a comic grimace—no one wanted these wonderful laws in the first place, and I'm taking them away [sniff] and going home. Maybe one reason for Schoenberg's inability to write music for the third act was his difficulty in conceiving a genuinely powerful Moses, who could demote Aron into non-entity with a wave of his hand.

Throughout the opera, Moses is a figure of heroically obsessive befuddlement. Victim of the incomprehensible command of an incomprehensible God, he imitates the divine unmeaning as best he can, by speaking sentences that swallow their own tails, like the serpent of eternity: he tells the Golden Calf, "Vergeh, du Abbild des Unvermögens, das Grenzenlose in ein Bild zu fassen!" (Perish, you image of the impossibility of grasping the dimensionless in an image). But one suspects that God himself knows much finer paradoxes: Moses is only fooling around in the margins of the ineffable. For Moses, speech is a domain of stutters and growls and gnomish grievances; as for music, it is hard to know whether his ear can hear it at all. If Elliott Gyger is right in believing that the other characters can't hear Moses's *Sprechstimme*, then Moses is a sort of meta-

operatic phantom who stalks and glowers on a level of reality on which the other characters don't exist at all: they are his hallucination and he is theirs.

Nietzsche considered that Socrates's whole philosophy was vitiated by his dislike of music—that is, until in the final days of his life, when he asked for music lessons. Thinker Moses can't sing, and may not even be able to hear correctly—he may be the first tone-deaf operatic lead. What he hears is mostly a kind of tinnitus, in the fashion of the decaying Smetana, or a kind of mute vibration, in the fashion of Beethoven, biting a stick and putting one end on the piano. Moses's *Sprechstimme* sounds like botched singing, as if Moses dimly understood that everyone else was sticking to the score, and only he was unable to follow the melody and the rhythm. And the sound of the Burning Bush—voiced by six singers and six speakers intricately subdivided—may represent the gibberish that a musically illiterate man hears when confronted with Modernist music. The Burning Bush resembles the Golden Calf in that it is an image of the impossibility of confining the dimensionless in an image, but Schoenberg's music, teasing, elusive, shapeless, tries to avoid any implication that the impossible might be possible after all. If it is music, it is impossible music.

In writing this scene, Schoenberg may have conceived Moses along the lines of those music critics—not necessarily hostile to Schoenberg's artistic goals, but certainly bewildered by them—who left Schoenberg's concerts scratching their heads, but with tongues far from stiff. Moses as Beckmesser. Sometimes Moses seems puzzled by music, sometimes (especially when Aron sings) he seems antagonistic to it: Moses's antecedents include the snare drum that tries, with its improvised pitchless urgencies, to overwhelm and punish the orchestra in Nielsen's fifth symphony (1921-22), and the baritone who puts a stop to the proceedings in Beethoven's ninth symphony (1824)—*O Freunde, nicht diese Töne*—though that baritone turns out to be a good deal more genial than Moses.

The high point of the first act is the opening scene, with its phonic simulation of something-beyond-music, and its somewhat deaf auditor. In the rest of the first act, Schoenberg accustoms us to the shape of melodies directedly derived from the tone row: the first 48 notes that Aron sings, at the beginning of Act 1, scene 2, comprise the row, its inversion, its retrograde, and its retrograde inversion. As the act proceeds, the row gets subdivided into more and more epigrammatic and comprehensible (comprehensible, and therefore fallen) forms: at the beginning of Act 1, scene 3, a girl marvels at Aron, a flame going forth to the waste land—she sings a retrograde version of the row (R10), but repeats the first four notes three times; then a boy replies that Aron passed by like a shining cloud—he sings a retrograde inversion of the row (IR7), but also repeats three times the first four notes. In this way the first four notes of the retrograde become a striking and memorable melodic figure: we easily the boy as an upside-down girl. As the music descends from the realm of the divine to the realm of opera, Aaronic tenor charisma, it becomes more and more preoccupied with graspable figures and intelligible procedures, though of the sort more often found in instrumental music than in vocal.

When we come to the great orgy that occupies most of the second act, we have, for the first time in the score, music, music that anyone would understand as music. It opens with a procession of camels, asses, and horses bearing sacrificial gifts for Golden Calf, and a Dance of the Butchers, carrying long knives. Glissandi seem to imitate the panting of animals, and to anticipate the lubriciousness of the upcoming revels. At the

section marked *Rascher* (m. 371), Schoenberg starts up (of all things) an accompaniment figure in monotonous arpeggios of stacked fifths, one sequence beginning on D, the other on C; as Elliott Gyger has commented, these figures stand out strongly because the perfect fifths are so idiomatic for the strings that the listener becomes aware of violins and violinists instead of “a subtly varying reservoir of disembodied timbres.” Above these arpeggios a xylophone starts playing a catchy fragment of the row (6): many of the notes from the row are omitted, because they have been demoted to the accompaniment, but the row’s notes 8-10 (F-G \square -A \square) become obsessively repeated, always terminating with a repetition of the A \square and a falling sixth (to C \square), strong on the first beat, weak on the second—the C \square is from note 11 of the row. After the xylophone, the trumpet takes up the catchy fragment, and notes 8-11 start to seize control of the whole texture: their rhythm (dotted-eighth, sixteenth, eighth; strong eighth, weak eighth) infects figures composed of different pitches. All this is part of the introduction to the Dance of the Butchers.

The Dance of the Butchers proper begins with two fortissimo chords: the first consist of the notes D, B \square , and G, the second of D \sharp , B, and F \sharp . The first may be gathered together from the row (R11), the second from row (R12); the first is a D minor triad, the second a B major triad, astonishingly abnormal in the context of this formidable opera. This passage could be straight out of Strauss’s *Elektra* (1909)—and indeed it is possible to hear the bellowing of the sacrificial animals, and the falling of the butcher’s axe, a sound not far from the crack of the axe on Agamemnon’s head so often recalled in Strauss’s opera. After this peremptory beginning, the dance proceeds, a fugato of trumpet figures in rhythms similar to those just described. Schoenberg provides a good deal of what might be called pseudo-retrograde, as for example at m. 446, where the rising notes B-(A)-D \sharp -C are followed by the falling notes C-E \square -B \square —the phrase seems to aim for B, but to miss it by a half-step. Everywhere the music suggests something energetic, clumsy, crackpot, an act of blasphemy against the row. I once played this passage for my friend Robert Morris, who responded with one word: craven.

The glissandi, the clumped vigor, the trumpet, the xylophone—all these suggest jazz, and Schoenberg may have intended it as a parody of pop music, like the ghastly stuff that comes out of the radio in Schoenberg’s previous opera *Von heute auf morgen* (1930). But I wonder whether Schoenberg’s indictment of music might be much farther-reaching.

There are passages in the grand classical tradition that have something of the sonority and constructive procedure as the Dance of the Butchers. A notable example is the hair-raising fugato in the first movement of Liszt’s *Eine Faust-Symphonie* (1854), at rehearsal figure Z (*Sehr langsam*). It is made up mostly of sequences of rising augmented triads displaced over the whole gamut; but Liszt doesn’t hesitate to include other sorts of triads when it suits him. Earlier examples can be found in Beethoven: the first movement of the fifth symphony (1808) fills up the entire phonosphere with a single figure—but that figure is much more stable than Schoenberg’s; a better example is the final movement of the *Tempest* sonata, Op 31/2 (1801-2), in which the obsessive four-note figure keeps distending or contracting its intervals, reconfiguring itself, leaping around the keyboard, and yet always retaining a recognizable shape.

Schoenberg staked his career on the priority of pitch over every other musical variable. The twelve-tone system assumes that the well-tempered scale is a universal

fundamental, like pi; and that music is a body of procedures for relating twelve different pitch-classes to one another. But in Beethoven, in Liszt, and especially in Wagner and Richard Strauss, there can be found a contrary line of thought: that the rudiment of all music is the figure, the cell, the gesture; and that this figure, while composed of pitches, is not subservient to them. Often Wagner or Strauss will take a theme and completely alter its intervallic nature—and yet the theme retains its identity. In fact, in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* Wagner composed *Leitmotive* (Nibelungs, or Hagen) so intensely rhythmic in character that you can recognize them when tapped out by a single kettledrum.

I don't know if Schoenberg quite articulated this to himself, but I see this sort of gestic music as a threat to Schoenberg's hegemony. In the Dance of the Butchers, Schoenberg uses the very compositional procedures I have just described: he retains enough of the tone-row to appease his conscience, but he makes the butchers jog to continuously permuting music-shapes remarkably independent of the intervals that compose them. In other hands (Beethoven's, or Verdi's—I'm thinking of *Dio mi potevi scagliar* from *Otello*), such music might indicate a suppleness of conception, a plasticity to altering emotional states; but in Schoenberg's hands it is merely diabolic slither.

This pandering has many ramifications. It is a concession to opera in the bad sense of the word—in Alex Rehding's words, “You want a love story? Okay, I'll give you a love story. Here, have some sex and violence.” But it disparages the thing it condescends to—and it condescends not only to opera, but to the whole gestic-dramatic means of development prevalent in instrumental music. If the Dance of the Butchers constructs music from unstable cells in order to indict music constructed from unstable cells, it is proscribing a good deal of the music we hear in our concert-halls. But it is possible that Schoenberg's accusations extend to everything we commonly call music. According to Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* (1911), all music that has ever been composed and ever will be composed is sleeping inside a single note:

The primitive ear hears the tone as irreducible, but physics recognizes it to be complex. In the meantime, however, musicians discovered that it is *capable of continuation*, i.e. that movement *is latent within it*. That problems are concealed in it, problems that clash with one another, that the tone lives and seeks to propagate itself. (*Theory of Harmony*, p. 313).

To think in terms of cells and gestures, independent of pitch, is to overlay an arbitrary form over the music derived from the spectral study of a note. Furthermore, Regina Busch has called attention to a strange but important passage in *Totentanz der Prinzipien* (*Death-Dance of the Principles*, 1915), where Schoenberg notes that bells keep ringing even after the twelfth stroke is finished:

one sound! Without any differentiation. ... We recognize that it lives; by its pallor and insipidity; by its wealth of indistinctnesses; ... By the fact that its pallor and insipidity now resolve themselves into colours and shapes ... it disintegrates more and more and is in motion... So much and every individual thing seems important... Now it sings; each one sings something different, thinks that he sings the same, and really in one direction it sounds in unison; (in amazement) in another polyphonic. In a third and fourth it sounds different again; but that cannot be expressed. (*Texte* [1926], p. 25, tr. Michael Graubart, cited by Regina Busch in “On the Horizontal and Vertical Presentation of Musical Ideas and on Musical Space (I),” *Tempo*, 1985)

It is as if silence, or a reverberation impinging on silence, can slowly gather its vaguenesses together, clasp itself into *tönend bewegte Form*, form made of moving sounds; and this sound-shape can appear as one note or a complicated composition according to where the listener stands with respect to it. A single note is always in the act of becoming all sounds; a complex web of sound is always in the act of fining itself down to a single note. The infinitely varied and the ultimately simple are two faces of the same thing. Therefore the God of *Moses und Aron* expresses his monotheistic character by whispering and shouting and singing all the notes at once—white noise has all frequencies, just as white light has all colors.

Music, then, is a motion that expresses a stasis. There is something deeply Parmenidean in Schoenberg's musical make-up: Parmenides taught that the world is an unchanging whole, and change is only an illusion created by the defects in our sense organs; Parmenides' pupil Zeno tried to confirm this belief through his celebrated paradoxes: the arrow shot by the archer never leaves the bow, because in a single instant it could travel no distance at all, and, since time is nothing but a heap of instants, the sum of a sequence of zeroes must remain zero. Schoenberg's music is astonishingly complicated, dense in event, but it keeps alluding to a transcendental plainness. In the end, perhaps all music is contaminated and compromised by its very audibility, its motility, its lack of changelessness; perhaps unheard melodies are not only sweeter, but the only music worth attending to.

Schoenberg was fond of music that leaves off on nothingness: the accelerating vanish of the shiver at the end of *Erwartung* (a piece described by Schoenberg as an instant of time turned into a half-hour spectacle); the soprano voices that climb to the threshold of hearing in *Herzgewächse* (1911) and the *Jakobsleiter* fragment (1917-22). In the latter work, the Angel Gabriel says,

Tritt näher du, der auf mittlerer Stufe
ein Abbild ist und den Glanz besitzt;
der einem Viel-Höheren ähnlich ist,
wie dem Grundton der ferne Oberton;
während andere, tiefere, selbst fast Grundtöne,
ihm wie der helle Bergkristall,
fremder sind, als Kohle dem Diamanten!

You on the middle level, step closer,
who are a likeness and possess the radiance;
who are more similar to one Much Higher
than the distant overtone to the fundamental;
while others, deeper, themselves almost fundamentals,
are more foreign to him, as the bright rock crystal
is more foreign to diamond than coal is.

Jacob's ladder is a *Tonleiter*, a scale: and God is the limit-point at the top of the overtone series. In a perspective drawing there is always a vanishing-point exactly opposite the eye, toward which all parallel lines toe in; and Schoenberg seems to have conceived music similarly, as an art in which all sounds point upward toward some single sound far above the threshold of hearing. *Moses und Aron* begins with God-music, an audible omnipresence, passing human understanding; it ends with a single prolonged F#, as if all

music had folded itself back up into that single note in which all music is latent. This is God's other face, the unitary simplicity on the far side of all complexity, the grace that comes (in Kleist's phrase) when we eat a second time from the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

But *Moses und Aron* is a work of art, not a theological tract, and the ending is trickier than it first seems. What drives Moses to despair is the sight of his people following an image: not the Golden Calf, but the Pillar of Cloud by day, the Pillar of Fire by night. To oppose magic is one thing when the magician is your oily brother Aron; another thing entirely when God himself stoops to miracle. The happy populace marches behind the Pillars to repetitive, clunky music with a high rhythmic profile, a dumbed-down version of the procedures we heard in the Dance of the Butchers. (We heard this same music at the end of Act I: it's as if, after all the sex and glitz and suicide, after the production of the Ten Commandments, after the destruction of the Ten Commandments, nothing has happened at all.) Moses feels himself an unwitting accomplice in God's own incentives to idolatry.

The last few bars are among the most widely admired of Schoenberg's achievements, partly because of the overwhelming beauty of the unison melody, partly because Moses and the orchestra seem no longer at odds with one another: the strings play the last seven notes of the row (RI4), but get the row wrong by reversing the B and the C#, as if the row were acquiescing in the general error of the human condition, allowing itself to *express* Moses's despair instead of representing a glassy mathematical transcendence in which Moses could play no part. In every way the music, like God himself, seems to be trying to accommodate human frailty.

I spoke earlier of the *Sprechstimme* of *Pierrot Lunaire* as a kind of clown-speech, but that wasn't quite right: the cabaret performer doesn't represent Pierrot himself, but only recites little poems *about* Pierrot's antics. If the parallel with *Moses und Aron* is exact, Moses is not himself the clown, but a narrator telling us about the behavior of a superior clown, namely God. Schoenberg was not a frivolous man, but there are some odd features to his theology. The only work of Schoenberg's that closely resembles (texturally speaking) *Moses und Aron* is his very last composition, the unfinished *Moderner Psalm 1* (1950): a speaker intones a prayer over orchestral and choral accompaniment, thanking God for not paying any attention to his prayers—the pleasure lies in the praying itself, not in the expectation of blessing. A deaf God who amuses us (amuses himself?) with inventing rules and then making exceptions to them; who dazzles us and ignores us; who craves our love and yet craves nothing—such is the clown God, the clown Schoenberg.